

BLM and the church: notes for conversation



BLM: (above) a demonstrator in France and (below) players and referee take the knee before an English Premier League game



2020's surge in response to the 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) movement was inspired by events in the USA.

But it has prompted reflection in the UK.

Specifically, for Christians, are churches the 'body of Christ' in today's culture? Of course all Christian believers affirm the wickedness of racism. In Christ there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but we are all one in Christ' according to Paul's letter to the Galatians (3.28). But many UK-born black Christians find their distinctive experience and perspective is not heard or valued. They are - unthinkingly - assumed to belong in the Caribbean or African churches founded by their grandparents and parents, but their own culture and education is British.

Here are some useful resources for churches tackling this question:

- Ben Lindsay's book *We Need to Talk about Race: understanding the black experience in white majority churches* (London, SPCK, 2019)
- A podcast from Felix Aremo available [here](#). Felix suggests three models of the multi-racial church, pictured as three alternative meals:
 - 'Bento box' – everyone is in their separate compartments,
 - 'Tomato soup' – many ingredients contribute to make dominant flavour, and acceptance depends on absorption into that cultural flavour or
 - 'Sunday lunch' – each different flavour is valued and recognised for the contribution it makes to the whole meal.
- A conversation with Duncan Forbes, Felix Aremo, Gabby Samuel, Efrem Buckle and Donna Thomas found on-line in a video [here](#).

BLM and the slavery question

The BLM issue is inseparable from the history of slavery and its aftermath. By 'slavery' here we specifically mean the mass importation of captives from Africa to form the labour force that drove development in South America, the Caribbean colonies and the southern states of the USA. Christians like to reassure themselves that, wicked as slavery was, it was stopped by Christians led by Wilberforce, whose movement succeeded in banning the international trade in UK legislation in 1807, enforcing the ban through the British Navy and colonial expansion in Africa, and abolishing slavery itself in the Empire in 1833. The truth is, as ever, more complex and more interesting. The American colonies were mainly under English control in the eighteenth century, and holding slaves was generally legal. Before and after the Revolution of 1776, a series

of Revivals made evangelicalism overwhelmingly the religion of the new country. The population of the USA grew six-fold in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is true that under the influence of evangelical Christianity most of those in the North gave up slaveholding, which the northern churches taught was a sin. But the south disagreed, and slavery expanded hugely. These figures come from US Census results:

Census year	White population	'Free coloured'	Slaves	Slaves as % of total
1790	3172464	59406	608807	15.8
1850	19553068	434495	3204313	13.8

The growth in the number of slaves was concentrated in the Southern states that formed the confederacy.

These are the numbers just for these states¹:

Census year	White population	'Free coloured'	Slaves	Slaves as % of total
1790	923333	19940	434750	31.5
1850	4218551	78361	2786303	39.3

From early days, American Christianity divided over slavery. In 1780 the Methodists determined that no member should be a slaveholder, and set a deadline of 1786 for this to be fulfilled. The south said *No*. The north-south division became a dispute over the bible and indeed the meaning of Christianity itself. The great evangelist Charles Finney preached that slaveholding was a sin and begged the churches to stand against the practice. At first, he also begged that the issue be not politicised, foreseeing the consequences as increasingly militant voices called for federally-ordered abolition. In the 1840s Baptists and Methodists split on north-south lines. The Civil War of 1861-65 started in the dispute over whether, as the USA expanded west, new states would be run by slaveholding whites along Southern lines. But it was really a **war of religion** – did the bible approve slavery or not²? The white south came to see the rest of America as neither Christian nor truly American.

The war was not the end of the matter. After a few years, the old order reasserted itself. The northern Republicans withdrew the Union army from the south in 1877. They left it to the control of the so-called 'Redeemer' Democrats. Blacks were stripped of the vote, segregated and driven back to semi-slavery on the plantations. Evangelicalism lost its social vision and retreated into 'fundamentalism'. The Democrats, oddly, were the party of the segregated south but also of left-wing 'progressive' politics expressed in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Deep reflection among African-Americans, incubated in the churches and the universities, forged a strategy for black people to take their place in American democracy, resulting in the civil rights movement of

¹ Of the 11 states that officially joined the Confederacy, four were states in 1790 (Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia). The other 7 achieved statehood later: these were Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida and Texas. My figures are for the first four in 1790, and for all 11 for 1850. I have not included the disputed states of Kentucky and Missouri, which also held considerable number of slaves. Only one state (Massachusetts, including the district of Maine which was not a state until 1820) held no slaves in 1790. The 1850 census recorded population in 36 areas – the 31 states admitted up to 1850, 4 territories and the District of Columbia. 18 of these held no slaves.

² Mark Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A short history*, Princeton, UP, 2008

the 1950s. After the key legislation passed in 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson (a southerner from Texas) knew that he had sacrificed the white south to the Republicans. It remained for the 'moral majority' movement of the 1970s to consolidate this capture and establish the modern Republicanism of Ronald Regan, George W Bush and (ultimately) Donald Trump.

This is a very brief summary of what needs to be a longer discussion of both slavery and colonialism – the point being that BLM is inseparable from this recent history of slavery and its aftermath.

Is BLM a culturally Marxist movement?

You will read that BLM should be discounted for its 'cultural Marxism'. What is 'cultural Marxism'? It refers to the philosophy known as 'critical theory' developed by Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt in the 1930s. This deviated from conventional Marxism in placing emphasis on human consciousness, i.e. the self-knowledge which human beings form of themselves. This school of thought became fashionable among young Marxists of the 1960s who combined it with the work of Gramsci, a Communist imprisoned under Mussolini in Italy. Gramsci argued that cultural institutions and practices were the reason for the 'false consciousness' (Engels' term) that meant that the working class fails to act in accordance with its true interests to overthrow capitalism. This school of Marxism teaches the need to challenge 'cultural hegemony'. Recently writers such as Andreas Breivik (imprisoned in Sweden for terrorist mass murder) and Joseph Boot (not a violent figure, but a political advisor for Christian Concern which published his 'manifesto') have encouraged great attention to 'cultural Marxism' as an antichristian movement to be identified and opposed by political and cultural work. It is easy to find evidence that some of the leading lights in 'BLM' see it as a means to oppose capitalism and to expose 'patriarchy' and 'homophobia' among the leadership of the traditional movements for black liberation and equality.

However, in my view, the fact that some motivators of BLM have a particular political agenda does not mean that BLM, as it has now developed, is about this agenda. As Christians, do we see BLM as an anti-Christian project to be opposed and exposed? Is this response faithful to the gospel? Or do we see it as a trigger to claim and apply values which are, and always have been, Christian, even if many Christians in the past have failed to see this?

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